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Community Capitals: Political Capital

Cheryl Jacobs, Extension community development educator

INTRODUCTION

Political capital affects how decisions are made in the community and how outside resources are brought in. Both individuals and groups can possess political capital. Political capital is based on organizations, connections, voice, power, and the ability to influence the distribution of resources.

Having political capital is having leverage to get things done. Political capital is created when access to power causes a change in resources. Political capital can affect the other capitals that exist in a community.

Powerful government officials can make things happen—"it's who you know, not what you know." For instance, representatives and senators can bring projects and funding to your community through their places in the government power structure.

Holding a political office is only one small part of the political capital that exists in a community. Political capital can also be found in individuals and groups. For instance, if faced with the threat of a school closing due to lack of enrollments, a group may form to battle the threat to the community. The group may start a letter campaign, get signatures for a petition, or disseminate information to the public as a means of exercising their political capital muscles.

Having political capital means you have the ability to influence naysayers, engage state and federal agencies in projects, discover new funding sources, and possess the leverage to get things done.

THE EFFECT OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON POLITICAL CAPITAL

Individual actions can increase a community's political capital. Activities such as voting, discussing politics with family and friends, and reading the newspaper all add to their awareness of how the power structures in the community and in the nation have an impact on what happens in their community.

Political capital can also be gained by being part of a group. School boards, political-party volunteers, and social, fraternal, and other organizations involved in political issues can also increase the political capital in a community. Political capital is also gained by developing working relationships with state and federal officials and politicians. Workers who belong to a union gain political capital through their membership in that organization. Groups such as these have more power, more voice, and more leverage because they act together for a common cause.

WHO'S IN POWER IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Cornelia Flora, director of the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development (NCRCD), says power in communities can take many forms and be found in many people.

In some communities, the power is held by elected officials. In other communities, the "real people in power" are those who have a reputation of being decision makers. Sometimes, too, there are hidden power structures that newcomers to a community run into when they attempt to cause change. Community members may know who the "right people" to talk to are in order to get things done.

Power can be shared by the few or the many depending on the community. You have to be aware of the political capital that exists in your particular community to accomplish your goals. Flora also states that community groups need to ask the question of “Who is running this town?” and offers these four questions to determine who has the power in the community:

1. Who can best represent the town to the outside?
2. Whose support do you need to get things done?
3. Who is needed to implement a project?
4. Who can stop a project in the community?

WHEN POLITICAL CAPITAL IS LACKING IN A COMMUNITY

Another important thing to note about political capital is who lacks it. Who are the groups that feel excluded from the community?

Lack of power and voice can turn into an “us-versus-them” atmosphere. When those who lack political voice are unable to be heard, there is a disconnect that occurs in communities. Inclusiveness in decision making doesn’t happen by accident. Communities need to make a concerted effort to make sure that all voices are being heard.

Voting patterns are an indicator of equality in a community. When people don’t vote, they are basically saying, “I don’t matter.” Voting statistics can also be a measure of how involved people will be in other aspects of community life.

Robert Putnam explains this principle in his book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam describes how changes in society in the last third of the twentieth century have led to decreased involvement in communities: “[V]oters are more likely to be interested in politics, to give to charity, to volunteer, to serve on juries, to attend community school board meetings, to participate in public demonstrations, and to cooperate with fellow citizens on community affairs.” When people feel that they lack the power to be heard, they unplug from community life.

Just as individuals can feel the effects of the lack of political capital, sometimes entire communities can feel a separation from those in power. The devastating hurricanes that hit the Louisiana and Mississippi coastline in 2005 are an example of how there was a breakdown in the political capital on a large scale.

This natural disaster amplified the lack of political capital by many of the poorest residents of New Orleans. Anger, frustration, and distrust of those in power grew, causing a breakdown in the system and the long-term effects that are yet to be seen.

Political capital is strongly affected by *social capital*. Social capital is the network of connections among individuals and organizations in a community.

In the hurricane example, as the lack of political capital increased, the social capital of the community decreased. In communities where social capital is low—like a disadvantaged neighborhood in a Louisiana community devastated by a sudden natural disaster, or a rural South Dakota community that has experienced a long, steady decline and may be feeling hopeless—these events can have two very different effects on political capital.

The community may feel distrust and anger toward the governmental agencies and representatives that should be helping them. Or the community can make political capital. It can spur people to get involved in political matters and make a difference. Negative events in communities may be the catalyst that increases awareness of political and social capital and thus motivate change.

Political capital is all about the power structures in communities. Power can be held by individuals, groups, or institutions. Lack of political capital can stop community projects from going forward, while access to political capital can open doors to a wealth of opportunities. Understanding the power structures in your community is an important key to creating community change.

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